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The Attack on the USS *Liberty* and its Cover-up

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I

In 1963, three World War II Victory hull freighters were refitted as technical research ships. Their function, formally, was "to conduct technical research operations in support of U.S. Navy electronic research projects, which include electromagnetic propagation studies and advanced communications systems." Jane's Fighting Ships called these vessels "mobile bases for research in communications and electromagnetic radiation.... [They are] considered electronic intelligence ships." They were designed to intercept foreign electronic messages, and they were popularly called "spy ships." One of these ships was re-christened the "*USS Liberty*."

In late May 1967, tension between Egypt and Israel had become serious, and the Navy Department decided that it needed a "spy ship" in the region. As the *Liberty* was in Abidjan at the time and could get to the Mediterranean in two weeks, it was dispatched. On June 5, when Israel attacked Egypt and destroyed most of its air force, the *Liberty* was already in the eastern Mediterranean. Captain William L. McGonagle of the *Liberty* immediately asked Vice Admiral William I. Martin at the Sixth Fleet headquarters to send a destroyer to accompany the *Liberty* and serve as its armed escort and an auxiliary communications center.

The following day, June 6, Admiral Martin replied: "*Liberty* is a clearly marked United States ship in international waters, not a participant in the conflict and not a reasonable subject for attack by any nation. Request denied." He promised, however, that, in the unlikely event of an inadvertent attack, jet fighters from the Sixth Fleet could be overhead in ten minutes.

By the evening of June 7, the *Liberty* was 13 miles off the coast of Gaza, in international waters. At about that time, the Pentagon decided that the ship might be too exposed and sent a message to the Sixth Fleet headquarters, copied to the *Liberty*, ordering the ship to withdraw to 20 miles from the coast. The message was misdirected to the Philippines, and the *Liberty* never got its copy. The Pentagon then decided that 20 miles was insufficient and ordered the ship to withdraw to 100 miles from the coast. That message, too, was misdirected to the Philippines and was never received by the *Liberty*.

As the ship had not acknowledged receipt of the earlier messages, a direct message was sent to the *Liberty*. Unfortunately, it was classified "top secret," and the ship was unable to receive it. So the *Liberty* proceeded on course to the waters off Gaza.

Notwithstanding the incompetent Navy communicators, the crucial fact was that the ship remained, at all times, in international waters. At about 09:00 on June 8, a plane approached the ship, but its markings could not be identified; the plane broke off, and then turned toward the Gaza coast. At 10:00, two delta-winged jets flew close enough to the ship to enable officers with binoculars to count the rockets they were carrying and even to see the pilots. But no identifying marks on the planes could be seen.

Still, there was no great concern, as the planes, which circled the ship three times, could easily see its markings and its large American flag. At 10:30, a flying boxcar circled the ship at about 200 feet, slowly giving further assurance that the ship had been

identified as American. This time, the plane's Israeli markings were clearly visible. The boxcar repeated this at about 11:00 and again at 11:30.

The ship continued its patrol at very slow speed when, at 14:00, two Mirage aircraft were seen rapidly approaching the ship. Although they were unmarked, they were assumed to be Israeli planes – the Arabs did not have Mirages – and no defensive action was taken (not that it would have done much good, as the ship was only very lightly armed). Both Mirage aircraft attacked the ship. The crew was totally unprepared, and the damage was great.

Captain McGonagle immediately informed the Chief of Naval Operations: "Under attack by unidentified jet aircraft, require immediate assistance." According to James M. Ennes, Jr., who was badly wounded in this first attack, a U.S. submarine that had been following the ship sent up its periscope and filmed the attack. He was told of this by one of the submarine's crew, and, according to Ennes, he subsequently got confirmation from three other persons in position to know the truth. They have never spoken publicly about the matter.

The first attack lasted about five minutes. A few minutes later, three unmarked Super-Mysteres attacked with napalm and dozens of rockets. There was then a short respite, and two more Mirages, also unmarked, attacked. The entire two-part engagement lasted about 22 minutes.

Throughout the attack, the ship tried to contact Sixth Fleet headquarters, but the Israeli planes knew the frequencies of the transmission and were able to block the messages, except when the attacks were underway. During those few seconds, the radio operator, one of the many on board the *Liberty* who performed heroically, was able to make contact with the Sixth Fleet. The first ship to receive and acknowledge the distress signal was the carrier *Saratoga*, which almost immediately dispatched 12 F-4 Phantom jets and four tanker planes to defend the *Liberty*. The Sixth Fleet flagship, the *Little Rock*, which had received the messages at almost the same time, was informed, and the *Liberty* was told that help was on the way.

It never arrived. Very shortly after Washington got word of the attack and of the 12 planes that had been dispatched to support it, Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara personally got on the radio circuit and said, "Tell [the] Sixth Fleet to get those aircraft back immediately." That message did get through, and the planes were recalled. In subsequent discussion of the affair, the White House directed the Pentagon to say that the Israelis had acknowledged their "mistake," that the attack had been called off, and that the Israelis would give assistance to the ship.

Nine men had been killed and about 60 wounded. But, in spite of what the White House said, that was not the end of the Israeli action. While most of the lifeboats had been destroyed in the first attack, the ship managed to launch three, but they were immediately attacked by Israeli motor torpedo boats. The Israelis destroyed two of the lifeboats – a war crime in itself – and captured the third. The torpedo boats also fired their cannons into the ship in an apparent last attempt to sink it. The carnage continued until 171 American sailors were wounded, many severely, and 34 were killed.

When the Israelis saw that they were unable to sink the ship after more than two hours of intense attack, they offered support to the survivors. Captain McGonagle, who had been badly wounded himself, refused, and his ship limped into Malta, where 821 rocket and missile holes and more than 3,000 holes from armor piercing bullets were counted. In subsequent "explanations," the Israelis said they had mistaken the ship for the Egyptian "*al-Qusair*," although the ships' profiles had nothing in common: the Egyptian ship displaced 2,000 tons, while the American ship displaced 10,000 tons. The *Liberty* was clearly marked, and it flew a standard American flag that measured five-by-eight feet. The flag was destroyed during the first attack, but it was replaced immediately by a nine-by-15 foot "holiday flag," which remained aloft throughout the subsequent attacks. The Israelis never attempted to explain how they had acquired the frequencies on which the ship transmitted, and why they had blocked them (the Egyptian frequencies would have been quite different). Nor have they explained why their aircraft were unmarked, or why the American flag was ignored. While in Malta, most of the surviving officers and men were interviewed in several groups by Rear Admiral Isaac Kidd, who ostentatiously took off the stars on his uniform in each case and said, "Now tell me, man-to-man, everything that happened." They all did. Then, equally ostentatiously, Kidd put the stars back on and said: "Now I'm talking officially; you are never, repeat never, to discuss this with anyone, not even your wives. If you do, you will be court-martialed and will end your lives in prison or worse." The threats were effective, and, for several years, almost no one spoke out. Ennes was the first to break the wall of silence in his extraordinary book, *Assault on the Liberty*, which was not published until 1979, however, and was generally ignored by the reviewers. Now almost all the survivors who can be contacted speak freely and bitterly. And no one listens.

George Ball was the most honorable undersecretary of state under Kennedy and Johnson. It is now widely known that he saw clearly what mistakes we made in Vietnam and that he recommended an early withdrawal. What is less well known is that he also believed our policy of underwriting all of Israel's actions in the Middle East to be harmful to America's interests and its foreign policy objectives. This did not endear Ball to the Israeli lobby, and Ball firmly believed, until he died, that he would have been selected secretary of state by Jimmy Carter if his appointment had not been vetoed by the Israelis.

In 1992, Ball wrote his last book, *The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present*. The title is a phrase from George Washington's farewell address in 1796. Washington counseled the new nation that, in "shaping its international relations, it should abjure any passionate attachment to, or inveterate hatred of, any other nation. Instead, it should cultivate peace and harmony with all." Washington was clearly referring to the attachment of some of his fellow Americans to France. Ball believed the "passionate attachment" of some Americans to Israel was, and is, equally dangerous. Although Ball was very well-known, and his previous books were widely and favorably reviewed, this book was ignored. *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times* carried reviews by defenders of Israel who used the occasion, not to review the book, but to launch *ad hominem* attacks against Ball. The book was not reviewed elsewhere, and there were no interviews on the daytime talk shows.

In his book, Ball, who was a top State Department official in 1967, wrote:

"The *Liberty's* presence and function were known to Israel's leaders. They presumably thought it vital that the *Liberty* be prevented from informing Washington of their intention to violate any cease-fire before they had completed their occupation of the Golan. Their solution was brutal and direct. . . . Apprised of Israel's plans from various sources, the U.S. Navy Department faced a delicate problem. Due regard for the lives of America's naval personnel should have impelled the Navy to urge the State Department to warn off Israel in no uncertain terms; meanwhile, the Navy should have alerted the *Liberty* to its danger and dispatched ships or planes for its protection. But none of these actions was taken in time."

Ball describes the attack and the slaughter of American seamen, and then goes on:

"The sequel was unedifying. The administration tried vigorously to downplay the whole matter. Although it silenced the crew, casualties to the sailors and damage to the ship could not possibly be concealed. Thus, an elaborate charade was performed. The ship, they rejoined, had not been clearly marked but looked like an Arab ship – which was definitely untrue. . . . In the end, the Israelis tendered a reluctant and graceless apology. . . . The sordid affair has still not been erased from the history books; an organization of devoted survivors has kept the cause alive over the years by publishing a newsletter and holding well-advertised meetings."

Is there any possibility that the U.S. government did not know what the Israelis were doing to the *Liberty* or that it thought that there was, in fact, an honest mistake? Senator Jacob Javits of New York said at the time: "Thank heavens the ship was attacked by the Israelis because we know it was a mistake." The unstated implication was that an attack by an Arab government would have been deliberate. Pace Senator Javits, there was no one at the top of the U.S. government who did not know the facts.

Dwight Porter, who was U.S. ambassador to Lebanon at the time of the Israeli attack on the Golan, told columnist Roland Evans in late 1991 that the CIA station chief showed him, during or immediately after the attack, the transcript of intercepted Israeli messages. Israeli planes had been given the order by the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) to attack the *Liberty*, but a pilot replied that it was an American ship. The order was repeated, but the pilot still insisted that he could see the American flag. He was then told harshly that he had his orders: "Attack it." And, as we sadly know, he did. These facts were published in the Evans and Novak column of 6 November 1991.

The columnists got further confirmation from an American-born Israeli major, Seth Mintz, who was in the war room in Tel Aviv at the time of the attack. He is quoted as saying: "... everyone felt it was an American ship and that it was the *Liberty* ... there were comments about the markings, about the flag. Everyone in that room was convinced that it was an American ship." Mintz, on the television program Evans & Novak, said that "[t]he Israelis were guilty of an outrage." The American suppression of the truth is surely an equal outrage. There have also been reports, never confirmed on the record, that at least one of the attacking pilots was an American citizen.

Major Mintz was apparently a dual citizen; at least he was living in Maine at the time he was interviewed on *Evans & Novak*. It is too bad that he did not make his statements earlier, that he had not renounced his Israeli citizenship at the time, and that he had not gone public immediately. But that would be asking a lot – too much, in view of the American government's own efforts to suppress the truth.

Ball is certainly right that the Israelis wanted no interference in their plans to occupy Syria's Golan Heights. The essentials of the Golan problem are well known; they can be described as follows:

"From 1948 until 1967, the Syrians sat on the Golan Heights and shelled the defenseless and peaceful Israeli farmers below. This was done out of maliciousness or a desire to be provocative or perhaps just because the Syrians were evil. Clearly, this situation had become intolerable to the Israelis, and they had not only the right but the duty to change it. And they did; the occupation of the Heights – although there may not have been any specific provocation during the Israeli attacks on Egypt and Jordan – was perfectly understandable and justifiable."

These "facts" were widely, if not universally, understood in the United States. Brent Scowcroft, subsequently head of the National Security Council, responded archly when I suggested that the story was not exactly right: "Everyone knows the facts," he said. "I was just in Israel and I saw for myself what had happened." The problem was – and is – that this Israeli history of the Golan is pure fiction. Every one of the 1,000-odd clashes between Syria and Israel between 1948 and 1967 was examined by the UN supervisory commission, which found that only a very few had clearly been caused by the Syrians. A few dozen were ambiguous, and all the rest were caused by Israel. But, many Israelis insist, the UN was notoriously anti-Israel, so how could its reports be believed? Well, there were many officers of many nations, and they all reported the same things. Could they all have been lying? We no longer have to rely only on UN documentation to confirm the verity of their accounts.

General Moshe Dayan, who commanded the Israeli forces in 1967 and gave the order to occupy the Golan, gave an interview to an Israeli journalist, Rami Tal, in 1976. The interview was kept secret until April 1997, when it was published in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*. It has been authenticated by Israeli historians, and General Dayan's daughter, Yael, a member of the Knesset, insisted that it be published.

In the interview, Tal interjected, "But they were sitting on the Golan Heights...."

"Never mind that," said Dayan. "I know how at least 80 percent of the clashes there started.... It went this way: We would send a tractor to plow some area where it wasn't possible to do anything – (it was) in the demilitarized zone – and [we] would know in advance that the Syrians would start to shoot. If they didn't shoot, we would tell the tractor to advance further, until, in the end, the Syrians would get annoyed and shoot. And then we would use artillery and later the air force.... And that's how it was."

Dayan thought that the Golan would have to be given back to Syria if there were ever to be peace in the region and that keeping it would result in the loss of many Israeli soldiers.

Then why did he give the order to invade? Essentially, it was because of pressure from the would-be settlers, who convinced Levi Eshkol, the Israeli prime minister, to occupy the Heights and the fertile lands beyond. When asked if that was all there was to it, Dayan replied:

"I can tell you with absolute confidence that (they) were not thinking about (security); they were thinking about the Heights' land.... I saw them; I spoke with them. They didn't even try to hide their greed for that land."

During the peace talks between Syria and Israel that took place while Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister of Israel, there was almost full agreement. Israel would withdraw from all of the Heights; there would be demilitarized zones on both sides of the border – more in Syria than in Israel. Perhaps the only significant unresolved issue was where the final border would be: the international pre-1947 border (the Israeli position) or the 1948 truce line (the Syrian position). A total of less than 15 square miles was at issue.

This encouraging development ended with the murder of Rabin and the subsequent election of Binyamin Netanyahu as prime minister. Netanyahu agreed to talks with Syria, but they had to begin all over again. The Syrians said that they wanted the talks to resume, but they would have to proceed from positions already agreed upon.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak resumed talks with the Syrians, but he was apparently not ready to let them proceed from the point reached with Yitzhak Rabin. Nonetheless, Syria, other Arab countries, and all those who are interested in peace in the Middle East have not yet given up hope that Barak will follow internationally accepted forms and traditions and will resume negotiations at the point which the earlier government had reached: full withdrawal from the Golan and demilitarized zones on both sides of the border. The Syrians maintain that Rabin agreed to the 1967 cease-fire line as the final Israeli-Syrian border; Barak maintains that this was only a "draft" proposal, not a firm Israeli commitment. I believe that either side could accept the position of the other without doing damage to its security or prestige, and that a logical compromise would be, more or less, to split the difference.

In his comments on the *Liberty*, Ball concludes:

"Yet the ultimate lesson of the *Liberty* attack had far more effect on policy in Israel than in America. Israel's leaders concluded that nothing they might do would offend the Americans to the point of reprisal. If America's

leaders did not have the courage to punish Israel for the blatant murder of American citizens, it seemed clear that their American friends would let them get away with almost anything.”

This is hard to gainsay. In fact, the Israelis tried to press their advantage almost immediately. During the 1967 war, Israel occupied the entire Sinai Peninsula, and among the prizes of its victory were the Egyptian oil fields that they proceeded to exploit to capacity until the Sinai was returned. But the main Egyptian oil fields were off-shore in the Gulf of Suez. The Israelis maintained that the new Israeli-Egyptian border was the median line in the Gulf and that the oil fields were to the east of the line, and therefore under Israeli control.

Then-General Rabin came to Washington very shortly after the war to press the claim. He said that Israel had occupied the drilling platforms during the war (which might have changed the legality of the matter), but, in fact, the general was lying, and we knew it. That did not deter Rabin. He had not come to negotiate; he had come to dictate, and he proceeded to tell Secretary of State Dean Rusk what “the United States had to do.” He even gave a schedule: this must be done today, this tomorrow, and this by the end of the week. Rusk was a mild Georgian, a gentleman who never lost his temper, never raised his voice. As Rabin ranted, Rusk’s neck turned red, and the red kept rising like a thermometer. When he was completely red, he said, quite coolly:

“General, we have all heard the Soviet propaganda, repeated by [Egyptian] President [Gamal Abdel] Nasser and others, that Israel is an American colony imposed on the Middle East to enable the U.S. to dominate it. We all know that is nonsense. But I would like to remind you that the United States is not a colony of Israel.”

Rabin did not get what he wanted – at least not regarding the Suez oil fields – a minor and a rare defeat.

An even more flagrant example of Israeli certainty that it could do anything against the United States and get away with it was the case of Jonathan Pollard, the spy who did the most damage to America in our entire history, according to Caspar Weinberger, who was secretary of defense at the time of Pollard’s actions. Pollard was a relatively minor official of the Navy Department with a very high security clearance. He was given names and numbers of documents by one or more other Israeli agents in the Defense Department; he then withdrew these documents from the files, took them to an Israeli safe-house where they were copied, and returned them to the files the next day. Literally thousands of documents were taken, most of which had little, if anything, to do with the Middle East.

Israel initially claimed that Pollard’s was a “rogue operation” and that the Israeli government knew nothing about it. Not one member of the American intelligence community believed this, but the U.S. government decided not to make an issue of it. Although this Israeli charade has subsequently been abandoned, no action has ever been taken against Israel; the aid programs have remained intact and relations have remained very friendly. Ball was right; the attack on the *Liberty* proved that the United States would never “draw the line” on Israeli actions.

III

Finally, let us face the crucial questions we would all like answered about the *Liberty* incident.

(1) Who knew about the attack on the *Liberty* and when did they know it? The attack was reported by the ship immediately, and the word was certainly on the president’s desk within 15 minutes – probably much less. So he knew. So did Walt Rostow and MacGeorge Bundy in the White House. So did Robert MacNamara, the secretary of defense. So did a number of senior military men. Admiral Thomas Moorer, who was not immediately involved, knows men who were, and he has spoken strongly about the scandal of the Israeli action and the greater scandal of the American non-response.

(2) Planes were dispatched from the mid-Mediterranean to the *Liberty* almost immediately after the attack. Why were they ordered to stop and turn around while the ship was under ferocious attack, and who issued the order? If the planes had continued, they almost certainly could have saved the 25 who were killed and the 110 who were wounded in the second and third Israeli attacks.

(3) Why did Admiral Isaac Kidd threaten *Liberty* crew members with “court martial, prison, or worse” if they talked about the Israeli attack? Did he do this on his own? Or was he ordered to do so and, if so, by whom?

(4) Why has there never been a full Congressional investigation of this whole affair, one of the most shameful in American history? The short answer is simple: All those who know the facts or could find them out are afraid to speak about the matter or to order the investigation. This includes both the Congress and the White House. In Washington, when anyone refers to “The Lobby,” there is no doubt which one is meant: it is AIPAC, the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee. The National Rifle Association (NRA), the powerful gun lobby, is not even comparable.

The American people know so little about the *Liberty* that there has never been a strong demand for answers and for punishment, or at least exposure of those who are responsible. New efforts are being made to reopen the shameful case of the *Liberty*, to try to raise popular consciousness enough to demand a Congressional investigation of the whole matter while there is still some chance that those responsible for the action and the cover-up can be held accountable. It is late; many of those involved are dead. Those on the ship, who had been frightened into silence, are now speaking out. Even if they are successful – and I fear they will not be – Israel and its supporters in Congress can be expected to try to ignore anything that comes out, any statements that are made, any pleas for justice. This approach has been remarkably successful since 1967.

A major American tragedy has been distorted, and there has been a major cover-up. All the guilty parties have to do is to hold on just a little longer; in a few years, those who remember and who demand justice will all be dead. We can take some small, cold comfort in the certainty that historians will describe the events completely and accurately. They will know whether it was President Lyndon B. Johnson himself or one of his assistants who gave the shameful order to the war planes to abort their rescue efforts. They will know why the Israelis took the action. Was it because they wanted the ship to be sunk before it could monitor the Israeli advance into the Golan Heights? Or was it because the Israelis had ordered us to stay out of the eastern Mediterranean, and the *Liberty* had disobeyed this order – knowingly or not – and therefore had to be destroyed?

Historians will learn the roles of Walt Rostow and Robert MacNamara in the cover-up. They will learn whether Admiral Kidd was acting on his own or on orders to silence, forever, the *Liberty* survivors. They will find out how many American citizens inside Israel knew of or participated in this action against America. They will even learn if any of the pilots who attacked the American ship were carrying American passports.

Yes, the truth will be known and widely accepted someday, and that will be good. How much better it would be if Congress would launch a determined effort to reveal the truth now, if it would call to account those in Israel and the United States who were involved in spreading the lies about the tragedy. The heroes who demand justice have a right to see it done in their lifetimes. And is it too much to ask that those who participated in the attack and its cover-up be exposed, if not punished, while they are still alive



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